

*Daddy* by Monika Helfer

Sample translated from the German by Lucy Jones

We called him 'Daddy'. He wanted it that way. He thought it sounded modern. For and through us, he wanted to invent a man who fitted into a new era. One in whom a different past could be traced. I think of him day and night, how he used to sit in his reclining chair under the standing lamp, all around him his own children and others, like those from the ground floor. Their ball rolled around his feet, and it never disturbed him. He'd be reading.

In the photograph stuck to the wall above my desk, he's lingering apart to the left. He looks as if he doesn't belong. In every other photograph my stepmother showed me, our father is standing right in the middle, our real mother by his side, the way it was meant to be. He was the director of the War Victims' Rest Home on the Tschengla plateau, 1,200 metres above the sea, a host who mostly smiled in photographs. But not in the one above my desk. My sister Gretel and I are standing in the foreground next to my mother, her hands resting on our shoulders. No one would guess that the man on the left is our father. He looks like a townie who has just stepped into the frame. Someone who's been told: 'Come, stand over here with us!' Some of the others are real townies, probably the majority in fact. But they're dressed as if they're from here, in traditional jackets with horn buttons and rugged, high boots although it's summer. They would have certainly liked to have been from here. Because this, you see, is paradise. Meadows full of the most colourful flowers. I knew them all.

In the 1990s, when I already had four children of my own, I travelled with my father to visit my sister Renate in Berlin. He was the one who wanted us to go together, not me. I was afraid he would embarrass me. I was scared he would unveil some mystery and talk about himself, and I would have found it all awkward, even the most harmless stories. When you've known someone your whole life, and only find out later who they really are, then it might be hard to bear.

It was already midnight when we arrived after an almost two and a half hour delay. The restaurant carriage had been closed, and we were exhausted and hungry. Renate hadn't gone shopping because she'd been banking on us eating out somewhere special. But by then, most of the nearby restaurants were

closed except for the one across the street, a gay bar, which served very good food and didn't play loud music. Our father couldn't stand that. We ordered sauerkraut and some meat that was soft and slightly grey, and then my father waved over the waiter and asked, 'Where's the little girl's room?' Howls of laughter all around the bar. That pleased him. When he returned from the bathroom, his back stooped, he'd limped over to sit with the men wearing make-up and sleeveless vests, their biceps muscular and tattooed, and they'd bought him schnapps and drunk a toast to him. He was the slightest among them, a grey bird among all the brightly coloured ones. They laughed and he laughed along with them. They weren't laughing at him. They were just in the mood to laugh, and he wanted to laugh too after his exhausting day. He paid no attention to my sister and me after that. We heard him talking in a voice we didn't recognise, clear and loud. Normally he mumbled and we often had to ask him to repeat what he'd said. One of the men came over to our table and said, 'Come and sit with us. Your father's a good man, a very good man, and we like him a lot.' I remembered what he said word for word, and so did Renate. What he'd meant, in our later interpretation, was that our grey-looking father, a civil servant and a financial advisor to boot, was actually a vibrant fellow. Whenever Renate and I recall this, we laugh a lot and very loudly, like he did. My husband says, 'You're laughing that way again because you're picturing your father in Berlin.' I say, 'You're right.'

The photo above my desk was given to me by my stepmother. I visited her when our father had already been dead for ten years, and she herself was well over 80. I asked, 'Do you have some time?'

'How long?' she replied.

'Long.'

'So, it's about your father,' she said. 'Am I right?'

'I want to write a novel about him.'

'True or made up?'

I said: 'Both, but more true than made up. Is there anything you can tell me?'

She: 'Wait till I'm dead. Then I won't need to get upset.'

She went upstairs and came down with a large envelope with about ten photographs inside, each enlarged to the size of a textbook. She moved the ashtray and the Maggi bottle to one side and spread the photos across the kitchen table. My older sister Gretel and I were in all of them.

'They were taken by Erwin Thurnher,' she said. 'He sent them to me some time ago.'

'Who's that?' I asked.

'You must know him! The photographer who took pictures of you up on the Tschengla. At the end of every season.' I remembered him. A lively man. Every time he set up his tripod and gave his instructions, there was a buzz of excitement.

'What's going on here?' I asked. 'In this photo. Why isn't Daddy standing next to us?'

'You should know,' she said. 'I wasn't there. We hadn't met at the time. Look at him! What was he thinking at that moment? That he might still study? Or might not? That he might make something of himself? Or that he would never amount to anything, ever? Or that things would turn out well despite everything? Or wouldn't? That this was all he'd ever dreamed of? That it was all over? Forever this time? That he was about to push you into the void, his wife and children? Or that he'd jump into the void himself? All over, finished? That he didn't want to go on living? Because he didn't want to be around when your lives together were over and finished...'

'Stop!' I shouted. 'You can't tell in a photograph what someone's thinking!'

'When you know what someone thinks, you can see it in their expression.'

'Not with him,' I said. 'No one could ever tell anything from his expression.'

He was smaller than the other boys and none of them knew where they stood with him, and for that reason, they didn't let him play with them. They were small too, smaller than the townie ruffians, but all the same bigger and brasher than him. He was gentle, pale-skinned. No rosy patches on his cheeks. No patches at all. His eyes were slightly slanted. And he had black hair. Pure white skin, like a girl's. No one teased him. Even when he was a child, people respected my father. I guess it was because he always spoke softly. Everyone assumes that people who speak softly see no reason to get upset. People appreciate that. That's why my father was liked by everyone. But when the boys had some mischief in mind—and in the country, games always involved some mischief—they didn't want him around. Because they were afraid he'd say they were up to mischief. Everything gets named only in retrospect: what childhood is, and which things are complicated or mischievous, peaceful or shadowy...

The poorest families were better off than my father and his mother. She was the servant of a farmer in Lungau, and unmarried. She had two sets of clothes: a dress, apron, stockings, blouse, undergarments—and her Sunday best, like most people. Except her Sunday best wasn't hers. She'd borrowed it from the farmer's wife. It might have been a long-term loan, but it was still a loan. There were a few things in her

house on permanent loan—crockery, a lampshade, a copper pan—I can't list it all because I don't know. On loan simply meant *it doesn't belong to you*. She owned practically nothing. Her son's father was the farmer. No one admitted this and no one denied it either. So, even the boy only half belonged to her. My father protected himself. He didn't want to know anything about this time. If the farmer had officially been his father, he'd probably have had to call him 'Papa'. But he was spared this. This way, he could keep out of the farmer's way without seeming ungrateful. My father made comments on pastimes like dancing or singing, swimming or acting by saying, 'Thankfully I was spared that.' This makes him sound like a misanthrope, but he wasn't. My sister Gretel once travelled to Salzburg-Lungau, to the village of Mariapfarr. She has a sense of family background, the past and family. She wanted to see where our father had grown up. Not that she wanted to make much contact with whoever she found there. She just thought it was important to know these things. At the time, our father's mother was no longer alive. But her blind sister, kind Aunt Genoveva, whom everyone called Vev, was. Our father didn't know that Gretel was tracing his family background. He wouldn't have liked that. By then Aunt Vev was living in the farmer's house and was almost a hundred. The farmer's son, who rented out rooms in the summer holidays, had a good heart, or rather, he did what any decent man would do: the house was big, and he had a room made up in the attic for Aunt Vev. A large porcelain bowl stood on a chest of drawers and next to it, a jug and a soap dish in the same design. With that, the little room was already half filled. She carried up the water herself. She smelled of curd soap, her hair too. Gretel said that Aunt Vev sat every morning on her bed and combed her hair. It reached all the way down to her bottom. She combed it a hundred times, Gretel counting along. She was called 'our good spirit' by the husband and wife of the house. She always seemed to be everywhere, gliding upstairs and down, up to her little room and down into the kitchen, her hand on the banister that guided her through life, her eyes blank milk-white orbs. She ate at the family table. She was treated well.

When my father was still a schoolboy, he, his mother and his aunt didn't live in the farmer's house. They occupied a hut next door. When you live in a house, a proper house, you don't say 'occupied', you say 'lived in'. The hut only had one room with a floor of beaten earth. Two tiny windows, each no bigger than a school atlas. They slept on camp beds with long legs because, after heavy rain, the floor often turned to mud from below up. The feet of the bed were placed in bowls of water that had to be filled up again every night. To protect against vermin. Whether it helped, I don't know. Bed bugs, it was claimed, couldn't swim and couldn't jump like fleas either. But fleas could jump.

The richest man in Mariapfarr was a builder. His house was made of stone. A proper, large house, with a ground floor that stood on rugged monoliths, while the first and second floors were plastered and criss-crossed with half-timbering, and the window shutters were dark red with a big white stripe running diagonally through the middle like a stately residence. Facing south there was a veranda and there was more glass throughout than in all the other houses combined. It had no adjoining stables and no barn. Even from afar, it smelled of cement. That was one of the few things my father liked to talk about: the smell of cement. A city smell. I am partial to it too—freshly mixed cement, mmm! The builder was called Brugger. And he owned a library.

I asked my father, 'How many books do you need before it counts as a library?'

He thought the question was very clever and praised me for it. Because he praised me, I liked asking questions about books. We were in 'our library'—the library in the War Victims' Rest Home. That's the other smell I've loved since childhood—book dust. Cement and book dust. What else?

'Here,' he said, 'there are one thousand three hundred and twenty-four books. You can call it a library.'

'Up to how many books is it not yet a library?' I asked.

'There has to be at least one shelf full,' he said. 'But it has to go from the floor to the ceiling, and it has to be at least one metre wide. Then it counts.'

'And what kind of books does it have to include?'

'That's the cleverest question,' he said. But I hadn't just plucked it out of thin air. I remembered he'd once said, 'Not every piece of rubbish people read counts as a library just because books are lined up in a row.'

'When you look at someone's library,' he said, limping along the shelves and running his right fingernail along the spines of books, 'you can tell everything about the person who owns it.'

Builder Brugger's library in Mariapfarr in Lungau was, according to my father's definition, not a library. The man owned—and my father remembered exactly, and we even knew it too because he'd repeated it often enough—eighty-three books. Just eighty-three books. But the room with two boards screwed into the wall—and there were only two—served that purpose alone. It was a room simply for reading. Besides the shelves, there was just a leather armchair, a standing lamp, and a small table with a chair in front of it. Builder Brugger had planned at some point to set up and furnish a real library, allotting it room when he was planning his house. But later so many other things had got in the way that he had shelved the plan, as it were, for his retirement. That was another of father's phrases: 'shelved the library'. He said it as if

quoting the builder and he said it scornfully. In any case, that room was always referred to by Builder Brugger's family as 'the library' or 'the study.' My father could remember every single book in it.

The builder's son went to the same school as my father. It was a first-rate primary school. My father was the cleverest of all the children, by a long way. By such a long way that he was something of a sensation. According to family legend, he had taught himself how to read and write when he was only five years old, so two years before he started school. His mother had regularly borrowed magazines from the farmer's wife to read to her blind sister. The boy sat next to them and listened. And then he asked his mother what writing was and how the words she was reading had ended up on paper and then came out of her mouth. She showed him the letters and explained that there were just twenty-six of them and that punctuation, like commas, colons, full stops, exclamation and question marks and so on, weren't part of the alphabet, but were there so you could understand the sentences. All the magazines were old and after his mother had finished reading them, they were burned. One day, the boy kept one back for himself. He didn't ask. He hid it under his mattress. Even though the magazine was supposed to be burned, he had stolen it, and this gave him a guilty conscience. It was summer and there was nothing for a five-year-old to do, except to behave, which meant being quiet and not being a nuisance, and not disturbing the adults. Not being there, in fact. The boy was good at that. He stuck the magazine into his trousers, pulled his shirt over it and went into the forest. He knew of a place that was shady where ferns grew and where there were mossy stones and that's where he sat down. He scraped some earth bare with his foot so that it was like a blackboard he could carve signs into. He'd already learned to count long ago, and although he could only go up to thirty, he had an idea how it continued and had simply held off from counting any higher. He didn't know in which order the letters in the alphabet went, just that there were twenty-six of them. He couldn't tell the difference between the capital and small letters either. His mother had only shown him the capital ones. Most of the small letters didn't look anything like their capital equivalents. The C was similar, as were K and O, and P bore a definite resemblance as did S and U, and it was the same with V, W and Z. That confused him. In the evening he put the magazine on the table and confessed to his mother that he'd stolen it. He was ready to be punished if only she would solve the mystery of the letters. He was expecting his ears to be boxed. That rarely happened. He didn't know when it would happen, why it happened or why it didn't. Sometimes it happened for a thing he thought was unimportant, for example, when he put his shirt on back to front. Then, at other times, it didn't happen for something more serious, like breaking the sugar bowl. He didn't let on when he felt pain. His face showed no expression, and he made no sound when his

mother hit him. It was as if she were beating a puppet. A psychiatrist friend of mine and my husband's, an expert witness in court matters, said that a victim's lack of expression can lead to various reactions in the person carrying out the punishment—sometimes more cruelty and at other times, horror at one's own cruelty. Victims, he said, surrender their bodies when they feel pain; they leave their bodies, in a sense, which is why their muscles can't move, even to make facial expressions.

This time, his mother laughed at him. Stealing was something different, she said. A different thing altogether. And so, she started teaching him. It didn't take much. He picked it up quickly. He enjoyed learning punctuation and the alphabet very much. Soon he was reading aloud to Aunt Vev. When his mother gave him a pencil and a scrap of cardboard, and a little knife to sharpen the end, he was quiet for the entire day, as if he wasn't there. When he eventually started school, he could read and write better than those in the second year and better than some in the third and better than some grown-ups, because there were quite a few who couldn't read at all.